

**U.S. Institute of Peace Dean Acheson Lecture Transcript
As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates
Washington D.C., October 15, 2008**

Well, thank you, Mr. West, for that kind introduction. It is good to be at the U.S. Institute of Peace, an organization I have followed and respected for many years. Actually, I have an ongoing relationship with the Institute in that I live next door to the site of your new headquarters, now under construction. Good fences do good neighbors make – so Dick, now about the noise....

My most recent real association with USIP, of course, was the Iraq Study Group, which Dick Solomon and his staff did so much to support and facilitate. Little did I dream as we met in the Institute's offices through the spring, summer, and early fall of 2006 trying to come up with a constructive way forward in Iraq that my whole life was about to change fairly dramatically. And then there was the Study Group's trip to Iraq in early September 2006. The circumstances in Baghdad were pretty ugly back then, but in retrospect there was one lighter moment during the visit. We were quartered in rooms next to the swimming pool behind the palace where our embassy is located. And about two in the morning, the electricity failed – and, along with it, the air conditioning. It was about a hundred degrees, even after dark. After lying in bed for awhile, feeling the temperature in the room rising steadily, I went out in shorts and a tee shirt to find someone to whom I could report the problem and get it fixed. And I encountered several of our soldiers, whose indifference to my discomfort was monumental.

It was too dark to see nametags but, looking back, I can tell you those soldiers missed one hell of an opportunity for quick promotion three months later.

It's a privilege to address the United States Institute of Peace for this, the first Dean Acheson lecture. As Evan [Thomas] mentioned, it's impossible to reflect on Acheson without at least some reference to his dry wit and patrician ways. Consider that, in a country where virtually every public figure bends over backward to appear the Everyman and avoid any hint of elitism, the Groton- and Harvard-educated Acheson referred to criticism from McCarthy and others as "the attack of the primitives."

He did not have much use for politics or politicians – and there's a story of his that is timely in light of the event taking place later tonight that many of you will stick around to watch. (And because of which I will be mercifully brief.) Acheson told the story of the man from Kentucky who, when asked about whom he supported for sheriff, said, "I haven't made up my mind yet; but when I do, I'll be bitter as hell."

That probably should take care of being asked to stay on in any successive administration. Of course, like many of his class, Acheson was an Anglophile, though with his family ties, he at least came by it honestly. When Acheson embarked on his "sentimental journey" to the U.K. in 1952, the State Department's West European Office sent up a memorandum entitled "Ice in Oxford." The document warned him that British policy when it came to putting ice in cocktails had been set in 1689, and had not improved since.

Of course, there are a lot of things that don't change here in Washington, either. David Brinkley once wrote about the time when the Senate was about to vote on Acheson's nomination to be an assistant secretary of state. A woman called him with a uniquely Washington invitation. She said, "If you're confirmed, will you come for dinner? If not, will you come after dinner for dancing?"

Acheson wrote that "Secretaries of State can find no hiding place from meetings." I should add it's no better place for secretaries of defense, something reinforced last week at the NATO defense ministerial in Budapest. Dean Acheson would no doubt have been gratified to see the institution he helped establish come to include the former captive nations of the Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union. He would have been less gratified of this expansion on the length of the North Atlantic Council session, where all 28 defense ministers expect to speak on every subject. My support for larger budgets for the Department of State has received a good deal of favorable commentary. In truth, it is simply an act of reciprocity nearly 60 years overdue. Between 1945 and 1947, the defense budget dropped from over \$90 billion a year to between \$10 and \$11 billion. President Truman hoped to cut it further, to between \$6 and \$7 billion. As David Halberstam describes in his book, *The Coldest Winter*, Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, who replaced James Forrestal and was nearly as unstable emotionally, wanted to run for president in 1952 on a platform of holding down defense spending. And so the Secretary of Defense, of all people, was a strong advocate of even more draconian reductions in the military budget.

According to Halberstam, it was Secretary of State Dean Acheson in 1950, who, seeking a way to deal with the Communist threat in Europe and elsewhere, championed increased defense spending and, indeed, surreptitiously organized the campaign to make it happen. So, just call my efforts pay-back time.

Though Acheson is revered by practitioners and advocates of what is now called "soft power," all of you know that he was no woolly-headed international altruist. It was he who said: "Power can be limited only by counterbalancing power. Without that, treaties, international organization[s], and international law are of no use whatever." Nonetheless, the treaties and international organizations that he helped bring into being were able to contain, and eventually defeat, the pre-eminent threat of the last half of the 20th century.

Rather striking is an insight that Acheson had about that threat. He once compared the menace of Soviet Communism to the threat posed by the Ottoman Empire centuries before, observing that they shared a similar "combination of ideological zeal and fighting power." To overcome Soviet expansionism would require, in his words, "the added power and energy of America."

In the wake of the end of the Cold War, a new threat has emerged to menace peace-loving people of all nations and all religions. In violent extremism, we face an adversary today that seeks to eject all westerners and western influence from the Middle East and Southwest Asia, to destroy Israel, and overthrow all secular and western-oriented governments in the region. It is an adversary without the resources of a great power, but with unlimited "ideological zeal" and no shortage of fighting power – a challenge that will require what the new national defense strategy, echoing Acheson, calls "the full strength of America and its people."

The long reach of violent extremism – emanating from failed and failing states, from ungoverned spaces – brought terror to America’s shores, and subsequently brought America and our allies to Afghanistan. That country has become the laboratory for what I have been talking about for the last year – how to apply and fully integrate the full range of instruments of national power and international cooperation to protect our security and our vital interests.

Think about the scale and the complexity of the effort in Afghanistan. There are 42 nations, hundreds of NGOs, universities, development banks, the United Nations, the European Union, NATO – all working to help a nation beset by crushing poverty, a bumper opium crop, a ruthless and resilient insurgency, and violent extremists of many stripes, not the least of which is al Qaeda.

Afghanistan has tested America’s capacity – and the capacity of our allies and partners – to adapt institutions, policies, and approaches that in many cases were formed in a different era for a different set of challenges. It is a scenario Acheson could relate to. He noted that when he first arrived at the State Department in 1941, that the institution was, and I quote, “closer to its nineteenth-century predecessors in both what it did and how the work was done than to the department I was later to command.”

Consider some of the tasks. There is the overall challenge of operating as part of a multinational, civil-military effort. For sure, coalition warfare is nothing new. We did it in World War Two, in Korea, in the Persian Gulf, and we prepared for it with our European allies through the 40-year twilight war.

However, in the case of Afghanistan, NATO’s operations are hamstrung by national caveats, where different countries impose different rules on where their forces can go and what they can do. A number of our allies and partners have stepped forward courageously – showing a willingness to take physical risks on the battlefield and political risks at home. But many have defense budgets that are so low, and coalition governments that are so precarious, that they cannot provide the quantity or type of forces needed for this kind of fight.

But it is not just what our and their brave soldiers can accomplish on the battlefield that is central to success in Afghanistan. An enduring requirement is the ability to rapidly train, equip, and advise Afghan security forces – as we are doing to improve the size and quality of Afghanistan’s army and police. Until recently, this capacity did not exist within most western governments or militaries outside their Special Forces. Central also to success is economic development, reconstruction, improved governance, the development of modern institutions, and a counternarcotics strategy – all in all, what NATO calls the “comprehensive approach.”

Afghanistan has also shown the importance of what is called strategic communications – and by that term, I don’t mean trying to use public relations as a substitute for policy. In Afghanistan, for example, the Taliban employ so-called night letters to sway and intimidate the local population. I’ve said before that we need the equivalent of day letters to persuade and inspire in the other direction. This is tied directly to the success of development efforts. As one USAID contractor who worked in Afghanistan put it, we need to show the citizenry that we are “fully committed to making a difference, rather than working disconnectedly on ‘one-off’ projects.”

To be successful, the entirety of the NATO alliance, the European Union, NGOs, and other groups – the full panoply of military and civilian elements – must better integrate and coordinate with one another and also with the Afghan government. These efforts today – however well-intentioned and even heroic – add up to less than the sum of the parts. The main objective of the NATO defense ministerial last week in Budapest was to take concrete steps to reverse that equation. Whether we will make progress remains to be seen.

Afghanistan is the test, on the grandest scale, of what we are trying to achieve when it comes to integrating the military and the civilian, the public and private, the national and international. Acheson could relate to the bureaucratic challenge at hand. He once compared his fellow assistant secretaries to “barons in a feudal system.” Since then, and especially since September 11th, we have made enormous strides in improving coordination and cooperation within our national security apparatus. The list of accomplishments is long. But so is the list of obstacles. We must overcome them. The security of the American people will increasingly depend on our ability to head off the next insurgency or arrest the collapse of another failing state. These are the things we must be able to do as a nation, as an alliance, and as an international coalition. As Dean Acheson did so brilliantly, we must be prepared to change old ways of doing business and create new institutions – both nationally and internationally – to deal with the long-term challenges we face abroad. And our own national security toolbox must be well-equipped with more than just hammers.

In closing, I would note that the crisis faced by the West in Dean Acheson’s time was that our erstwhile ally in the bloody victory over the Axis powers wound up in charge of half of Europe. The Marshall Plan and other measures that Acheson and other “wise men” put in place were, to borrow the phrase of historian John Lewis Gaddis, “enlightened counter-measures” designed to contain the Soviet Union, to dissuade those not under its sway from voluntarily choosing Communism, and to give hope to those under the heel of the tyrant.

Enlightened counter-measures we take today will bolster the internal strength of vulnerable states so that they will not harbor violent networks seeking to launch the next attack. So they will not fall prey to ethnic fissures, sectarian conflict, crime, terrorism, national disasters, economic turmoil, and disease – each of which can be every bit as destabilizing as militaries on the march. I assume we will be able to count on organizations like the Institute of Peace to continue on this road. There is no way to predict the future, nor can we foretell the effect that decisions we will make today will have a decade or two from now. But I believe that one thing is clear from history: When America is willing to lead; when we meet our commitments and stand with our allies, even in times of trouble; when we make the necessary institutional changes; when we make the necessary sacrifices; when we take the necessary risks to uphold and defend both our values and our interests – then great and good things can happen for our country and for the world. Dean Acheson believed this. And so do I.

Thank you.

Source: [*Department of Defense*](#)